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Order in Public Worship

14: 29-40

Order in public worship DIG: What guidelines does Paul give for speaking in tongues? Why? What guidelines did he give for prophesying? Why? When does it seem likely that prophecy ceased? What was Paul's concern regarding wives during public worship during the first century? Why did Paul have to defend his apostolic authority in such a strong manner?

REFLECT: How can you tell when people are more interested in exhibition than in building others up in your place of worship? How can you apply these lessons in order to public worship today? Is your worship team focused on entertaining you, or bringing you into the Most Holy Place, into the presence of ADONAI? How can you build someone up this week?

For God is not a God of confusion but of peace.



The **Corinthian** church had many serious problems. Like many believers today, **they** had great difficulty in not mimicking the unbelieving and corrupt society around **them**. **They** wanted to be in **God's** Kingdom, while keeping one foot in the kingdom of this world. **They** wanted to have the blessings of this life but hang on to the pleasures of the old. In other

words, **they** wanted to have the best of both worlds, but **Paul** plainly warned **them** that that was impossible. Clearly, **they** were a mess. We have had twenty-one centuries learning how to “do church,” but in 55 AD, the **Corinthian** church was still in its infancy. **The Word of God** does not change, but cultures do change, and **Paul** was writing in the culture of **his** day.

Only after teaching broadly and presenting general principles in **12:1** to **14:25** does **Paul** give specific rules for the use of the verbal **spiritual gifts of prophecy, tongues** and **interpretation of tongues** in **public worship**. In doing so **he** follows **his** pattern in **8:1** to **11:1** (to see [link click Bj - Concerning Our Freedom in Messiah](#)), there, also, the general principles came at the end of the discussion concerning our freedom in **Messiah**.⁴⁶⁷

The primary emphasis in **verses 26** through **40** is that **the worship service** should be conducted in an **orderly fashion**, contrary to what had been happening in **Corinth** up to that time. **What is our conclusion, brothers? Whenever you come together, let everyone be ready with a psalm or a teaching or a revelation, or ready to use his genuine gift of tongues or give an interpretation.** All of **God’s spiritual gifts** are beneficial if done in an **orderly manner**. But that was the problem. Everyone wanted to participate at the same time. **They** were not interested in serving, or learning, or **building** others **up**, but only in self-expression and self-glory. Everyone vied for attention and preeminence. Therefore, **Paul** directed **their** focus to others by telling **them** to **let everything be for building up the Body of Messiah (14:26)**.

Tongues in public worship: If the true **gift of tongues** (Greek: *glossa*) is exercised, let it be by two or at most three, and each in turn; and let someone interpret (14:27). Such a command would not be fitting if **Paul** had in mind the **pagan gibberish** (see [Dn - Pagan Gibberish is Unproductive](#)) of a private prayer language. The Greek word for **interpret** is *hermeneuo*, which means *translation* as in **John 9:7** and **Hebrews 7:2**. The **gift of interpretation** was a supernatural ability to *translate a language* one had never heard so that **the congregation** might be **built up** by the message (14:5). You cannot translate **gibberish**.⁴⁶⁸

However, **an interpreter** must be present if **tongues** were spoken. Although speaking in **languages** and translating them were distinct **gifts**, **they** were not to be used apart from each other. **An interpreter could not exercise his gift** unless someone was **speaking in** the genuine **gift of tongues**, and **the speaker should not exercise his gift** unless there was an **interpreter** present. **Paul’s** instruction assumed that **the congregation** knew which believers in **the congregation** had **the gift of interpretation**. **Paul** continued: **And**

if there is no one present who can interpret, let the people who speak in tongues keep silent when the congregation meets. The rule was clear and simple: no interpreter . . . no speaking in tongues. In that case, a person who still felt compelled to speak was to meditate and pray. That is to say, **they can speak silently to themselves and to God (14:28).**

Prophecies in public worship: Judging from **Paul's** letters to **Titus** (64 AD) and **Timothy** (67-68 AD), **prophets** ceased to function in the Church even before the end of the apostolic age. In those letters **he** makes considerable mention of church leadership - elders, deacons, deaconesses, and bishops - but makes no mention of **prophets**. Along with **the apostles**, **prophets** were a part of **the foundation** of the early Church (**Ephesians 2:20**). And when **Paul** wrote to **Corinth** in 55 AD, **prophets** were still very central to the ministry there. In fact, nowhere in this letter is there mention of a pastor, elder, or overseer. Since **prophets** were leaders in the **Corinthian** church, **Paul** was compelled to give **four regulations** for **prophesying**:

First, let only two or three prophets speak at any given service (**14:29a**). Those **prophets** spoke for **the Lord** in two ways. In some instances, **they** gave new revelation from **God** to the church. And, by reiterating what **the apostles** taught, **they** also proclaimed what had previously been revealed, much as preachers and teachers of **the Word** do today.

Second, while some prophets spoke in public worship, the other prophets present were to weigh (Greek: *diakrino*, meaning *to pass judgment*) **what they said (14:29b)**. The judging prophets may have had **the gift of discernment** (see **Cq - The Distinguishing of Spirits**), or **they** may have tested what was said with **their word of knowledge** (see **Cl - The Word of Knowledge**). In any case, **they** were collectively to evaluate the validity of the **prophetic** messages.

Paul reinforced the principle of **prophets** judging one another's messages by saying: **The prophets' spirits are under the prophets' control**. This can mean either that each individual **prophet** should not let **himself** or **herself** be carried away into unseemly behavior, or that **the prophets** as a group can exercise control as needed over individuals among their number. But clearly, uncontrolled **ecstatic utterance** had no place in the **public worship, for God is not a God of confusion but of peace (14:32-33a)**. Here is the key to the whole chapter. Our worship of **God** should reflect the character and nature of **YHVH**. **He is the God of shalom** and harmony, not strife and **confusion (Romans 15:33; 2 Thessalonians 3:16;**

Hebrews 13:20). ADONAI cannot be honored where there is **disharmony** and competition, self-serving and self-glorifying. Chaos and discord in **public worship** is certain proof that **the Ruach** is not in control. Where **the Spirit** rules there is always **shalom (James 3:14-18).**⁴⁶⁹

In addition, believers must not play fast and loose with the issues of inspiration and revelation. An accurate understanding of those doctrines is essential for distinguishing between the voice of **God** and the human voice. In the past men who professed to speak for **God**, but spoke on their own opinions were to be executed (**Deuteronomy 13:1-5**). Since continuing revelation has ceased even before the canon of Scripture was completed, we are instructed to shun false **prophets** and heretics (**First John 4:1**).⁴⁷⁰

Third, and if something is revealed to a prophet who is sitting down, let the first one be silent (14:30). A new revelation took precedence over the reiteration of something that had already been taught. It was not that the truths in the new revelation were necessarily more important than those then being proclaimed, but, at that moment, the news should be heard while it was fresh from **the Lord**. That is not an issue in the Church today because the revelation aspect of the prophetic ministry ceased with the completion of the B'rit Chadashah. But apparently such conflicts in the early church sometimes occurred. When they did, **the prophet** with the new revelation was to be given the floor. To put it another way, when **God** spoke directly, everyone was to listen.

Fourth, whether to give new revelation or to reinforce previous revelation, **the prophets** were to **prophesy one by one**. Just as with speaking in **tongues**, it was essential that only one person speak at a time, **with the result that all will learn something and all will be encouraged (14:31).**⁴⁷¹

Wives in public worship: As in all the congregations of God's people, let the wives remain silent when public worship the congregation meets; they are certainly not permitted to speak out. Paul urged that **public worship** not be turned into a disruptive question-and-answer session. It is very believable that these **women** assumed that **prophets** or **prophetesses** functioned much like the oracle at Delphi, who only **prophesied** in response to questions, including questions about purely personal matters. **Paul** argues that **prophecy in the congregation** of believers was different. **Prophets** and **prophetesses** spoke only in response to the prompting of **the Ruach Ha'Kodesh**. **Paul**, then, limited such questions to **the home**. **Rather, let them remain subordinate, as also**

the TaNaKh (as a general principle) **says; and if there is something they want to know, let them ask their own husbands at home** (we assume that unmarried **women** or **widows** could ask the elders or other men in **their** own families). **For it is shameful for a woman to [disrupt] a congregational meeting (14:33b-35).** **Paul** wanted things done in an **orderly manner**. Apparently certain **wives** in **the Corinthian congregation** needed to hear this instruction. There were more than **uncovered heads** that were inappropriate in regard to **their** participation in **public worship** (see **Bx - Man is Born of Woman**), and **Paul** was not about to avoid those issues.⁴⁷²

Paul places **his** instruction precisely here in **his** letter because it is here that **he** is dealing with matters of decorum and **order** in **public worship**. **His** advice may seem curt and abrupt only if one ignores that **he** has already discussed the applicable general principles, and that the people asking this question were already familiar with the context of the problem, since they brought it up in the first place. If we could not supply such a framework for these verses, we might have to conclude, as some do, that **Paul**, under the inspiration of **the Ruach Ha’Kodesh**, was demeaning **women**. Or even worse, some even deny that **First Corinthians 14:34-35** as authentic to the letter. That is a very slippery slope.

There are a number of places in **the TaNaKh** where a subordinate role for **women** is assumed or prescribed, although other places envision an equal or superior role. **The Talmud reports that Rabbi El’azar ben-’Azaryah (early second century) gave a homily on the verse, “Assemble the people - the men, the women, and the little ones” (Deuteronomy 31:12), in which he said, “If the men came to learn, the women came to hear” (Chagigah 3a). To “learn” in Judaism is to study by discussing and thus to fully understand, because one’s questions get answered; whereas to “hear” is to listen to the discussion by not participate in it.**⁴⁷³

There were times in informal meetings and Bible studies where it was entirely proper for **men** and **women** to share equally in exchanging questions and insights. **Paul** is not implying that **women** could not **prophecy**, teach, or **pray** at church. We know that there were **women prophetesses (Acts 21:9)**, and in this very letter **Paul** permits **women** to **pray** and **prophecy** in **public worship (11:5)**. But when the church came together in **public worship** **God’s** standards were clear: there needed to be **order**. Obviously many of **the Corinthian** believers, **men** and **women** alike, had opposed **Paul** on this matter. **They** were determined to follow **their** own principles and standards regardless of what **the apostle** or other mature leaders said. In its pride and arrogance, the church wanted to decide on its own what was godly and proper. **They** acted as if **they** had a corner on the truth and probably dared others to question **them**.

The Corinthians put **themselves** above Scripture, either by ignoring it or interpreting it in ways that fit their own preconceived notions. Therefore, **Paul** challenged **them** with **his** most biting and sarcastic words yet: **Did the Word of God originate with you Gentiles? No! It originated** with the Jewish people and **the TaNaKh. Or are you the only people it has reached? (14:36).** He said, in effect, “If you didn’t write Scripture, then obey it! If you are not the sole receivers of **God’s Word**, then subject **yourselves** to **it** as faithful **children of God, as all the congregations of God** are obliged to do.” No **believer** has the right to overrule, ignore, alter, or disobey **God’s Word**. No one is to put **themselves** above **God’s Word**.

Then, **Paul** continued the challenge: **If anyone thinks he is a prophet or is endowed with the Spirit, let him acknowledge that what I am writing you is a command of the Lord (14:37).** In the context of what **Paul** has been focusing on with reference to **prophets** and **tongues**, it seems that **spirituality** must refer primarily to those who spoke in the true **gift of tongues**, the special **spiritual language** that **the Corinthians** valued so highly. **His** point was this, “If a person claims to be a **prophet** or to have **the gift of tongues**, or any other **spiritual gift**, the mark of **his** true calling and faithful ministry will be **his** acknowledging that what **I** teach as **an apostle** are **the truths of God**. If a person is truly called or **gifted of God** and was sincerely trying to follow **Him**, **he** will submit the exercise of that calling and **gift** to the principles **God** has revealed to **me** as **His** commandments.” What **Paul** taught was not optional.

On the other side of the coin: **But if someone doesn’t recognize this, then let him remain unrecognized (14:38).** This play on words carries the idea that anyone who disregards **the Word** should himself be disregarded. The mark of a **false prophet** (see the commentary on **Second Corinthians Af - The Problem of the False Apostles**) or a counterfeit of **tongues**, or of a person who misuses a true calling or **gift**, was his rejection of what **Paul** taught. Because such people rejected **the apostle’s** teaching, they were rejected as legitimate servants of **God**. This emphasis on authority comes at an appropriate place in the book because so many **Corinthian** believers wanted to disregard **Paul’s** words about **order in public worship**. **Paul** says that the church should reject such ignorant, disobedient, self-styled rejectors.

Paul concludes the chapter with a summary appeal for **the Corinthians** to hold **prophecy**, the teaching and preaching of **God’s Word** (see **Di - The Word that Builds Up**), in the superior position of **their public worship**, but not to reject the legitimate **speaking in tongues**. **So, my brothers, eagerly seek to prophesy and do not forbid speaking in tongues.** The phrase **do not forbid** is in the plural and does not advocate individual

speaking in tongues, but refers to the church as a group allowing **the** proper **gifts** to be exercised. **Tongues** were a limited **gift**, both in purpose and duration, but it *was* **the Lord's gift**, and, as long as **it** was active, **it** was not to be despised or hindered. **But let all things be done in a proper and orderly way (14:39-40).**⁴⁷⁴